



# Revitalization of the Basque language : the case of the Northern Basque Country. How to reinforce synergy between agents of the linguistic policy, authorities and society?

Jean-Baptiste Coyos

## ► To cite this version:

Jean-Baptiste Coyos. Revitalization of the Basque language : the case of the Northern Basque Country. How to reinforce synergy between agents of the linguistic policy, authorities and society?. "Language Emancipation of Historical Minorities" Nordic-French workshop - Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Oct 2008, Paris, France. <artxibo-00334717>

**HAL Id: artxibo-00334717**

**<https://artxiker.ccsd.cnrs.fr/artxibo-00334717>**

Submitted on 27 Oct 2008

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



**REVITALIZATION OF THE BASQUE LANGUAGE:  
THE CASE OF THE NORTHERN BASQUE COUNTRY**

**HOW TO REINFORCE SYNERGY BETWEEN AGENTS OF THE LINGUISTIC  
POLICY, AUTHORITIES AND SOCIETY?**

**Jean-Baptiste Coyos**  
Basque Text and Language Study Center  
CNRS UMR 5478 - Bayonne (France)  
jean-baptiste.coyos@wanadoo.fr

**1. Introduction : a short presentation of the Basque language and of the Basque Country**

In this paper I want to propose a new point of view about the language policy recently initiated towards the revitalization of the Basque language in the Northern Basque Country, which is a part of the French department called the Pyrénées-Atlantiques. I will try to avoid repetitions of the recent publications about the situation of Basque, and those about the language policy pursued in this part of the Basque Country (c.f. the bibliography). However, to introduce my speech, I shall begin with giving some data about it.

The Basque language, *euskara*, is a non Indo-European language which predates the arrival of those classified as Indo-European in Europe. Basque is isolated from a genealogical viewpoint, and is not related to the European languages from a typological viewpoint too. The Basque Country, *Euskal Herria*, is located along the Atlantic Ocean, and is divided between the French and the Spanish states, on both sides of the Pyrenees, with two autonomous communities in the latter state: the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and Navarrese Autonomous Community (NAC). In these two communities – but mainly in the Basque Autonomous Community – the Basque language speakers have gained a partial control in a range of private and national institutions. On the contrary, the advance is very limited in the Northern Basque Country. The Basque Country has a little more than three millions inhabitants.

**2. An insight into the situation of Basque in the Northern Basque Country**

Two languages coexist in the Northern Basque Country (NBC) or French Basque Country. One, official, all-powerful, is present in all the areas of use – this is the French language. The other one, the Basque language, is non official and more and more excluded from the areas in which it has traditionally been present, that is to say the family, the immediate community and such social areas as religion.

Basque is a minority, threatened language in the NBC. The vitality of the Basque-speaking community is rather weak in the NBC, compared with the other Basque communities.

Thanks to the four sociolinguistic surveys made since 1991, we have now a diachronic perspective of the situation in the whole Basque Country. The full bilinguals have increased from 21.39% in 1991 (505,200) to 25.7% (665,700) in 2006; the passive bilinguals have increased from 7.71% in 1991 (182,700) to 15.4% (397,900) in 2006. Much progress has been made in the Basque Autonomous Community due to an active institutional language policy, whereas little progress has been made in the Navarrese Autonomous Community.

The situation is one of ingoing retirement in the Northern Basque Country. The full bilinguals have reduced from 32.73% (66,200) to 22.5% (51,800) in 2006; nevertheless the passive bilinguals have increased from 7.04% (14,700) in 1991 to 8.60% (19,800) in 2006. The unilingual French speakers are now 68.90%, which represents about 158,600 persons. One third of all the bilinguals are over 65 years-old.

The rapid growth of the population in the North is mainly due to a continuing immigration from France. So, French speakers are in greater number in NBC, and all the Basque-speakers are bilingual. Now, there are no unilingual Basque people anymore.

All the specialists agree with the fact that to guarantee the future of a language, a fundamental step is inter-generational transmission through families (sixth stage in the Fisman's Reversing Language Shift model, 1991 : 398-399, 2001 : 467). I quote the last sociolinguistic survey: « In the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre, more than 98% of children whose parents are bilingual learn Basque at home. Although the corresponding proportion for the North is also high, it stands at ten percentage points lower than in the other regions (...). When one parent doesn't speak Basque, 20% of children in the BAC, 9.1% of Navarrese and 4.6% of northern children still learn Basque at home » (*The continuity of Basque IV*, 2008 : 211). So we can say that the transfer of the mother tongue by Basque-speaking parents is weak in the NBC.

We cannot say that language loss is reversing, or at least stabilizing, even if, for the first time in 2006, the decrease of the number of full bilinguals has stopped for the inhabitants from 16 to 24 years-old, and their number has begun to rise. This is due to the development of Basque school teaching in the NBC.

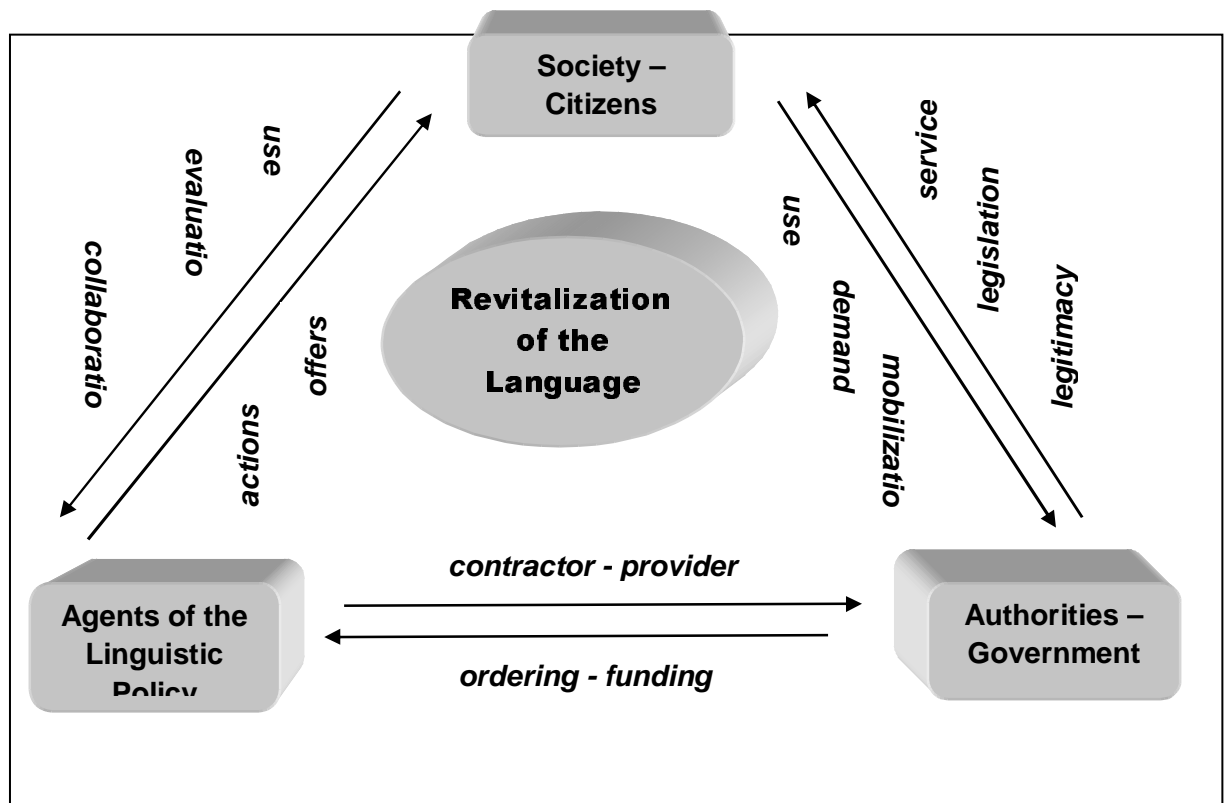
A second kind of survey, the measurement of street use, repeated every four or five years since 1989, give us a lot of real data gathered in the field. Here again, the improvement in use in the Basque Autonomous Community and among children is salient ; on the contrary an inexorable decline is going on in the Northern Basque Country, even among young speakers.

### **3. The process of revitalization or loss of a language : the « Three Partners Model »**

From a general point view, we can say that three partners, three protagonists are involved in the process of recovery or loss of a language. I quote Porcher and Faro-Hanoun : « *Les trois pôles majeurs d'une politique linguistique sont le commanditaire, le prestataire et le destinataire* » (2000 : 151). These three partners are essential.

To make it simpler, I would say that the government, the regional and local authorities are the decision-makers and financial backers (*le commanditaire*), the agents of the linguistic policy are the providers, the project managers (*le prestataire*) and that the society, the citizens are the addressees/beneficiaries (*le destinataire*). They all interact together.

The most difficult partner to mobilize is the civil society (Coyos : 209). The following scheme is of my own. In the following paragraphs, this three-component model will be adapted to the peculiar situation of the Northern Basque Country and to the dynamic interactions.



**The « Three Partners Model »**

1° The **authorities**. The institutional support provided by the state or the local government is very important, if not vital. Authorities have at least three main roles: making decisions, funding projects, and adopting – or not – language laws and linguistic rights for the language minority. But sometimes, they are also agents in offering language teaching and use in the education system, services in the language (health, transport, justice, police, and so on) and promotion of it. They give legitimacy to the revitalization project.

But Institutional policy alone cannot revitalize a threatened language, and active community participation is necessary (the case of Ireland and Gaelic language is often cited).

2° The **agents of the linguistic policy**. I have said that the agents of the linguistic policy are the providers, the project managers of the implemented language planning. They are sometimes distinct from the administrative staff, because public administration, government don't or did not take into account this domain.

3° But the principal factor necessary to the recovery of a language, the *sine qua non* condition in my opinion and model, is the **citizen involvement and commitment**. The role of citizens is necessary, and sometimes sufficient enough for the transmission of the language, even if it is a minority language. The most compelling proof is, in the case of Basque, the succeeded transmission of the language through centuries, without any public support, and without any school teaching.

But now, as we know, the living conditions have changed for most of the minority languages in the world and for the Basque language too. Basque cannot live in the same way as it lived because the Basque Country is now completely integrated in the European Community ; it takes a full part in the globalization of pan-Western economy and culture ("motor of the language shift", Fishman, 2001 : 6). Moreover, the responsibility of the language normalization cannot only be delegated to the local authorities, associations and specialists.

The minority language citizens make the language alive by using it. Learning it, supporting it, they help the revival process of the minority language. We have to take into account that, in the case of a linguistic minority, the society is two-folded from a linguistic point of view : a dominant-language majority and a bilingual minority. I do not distinguish in this diagram the various speech communities which form the society as a whole.

Using this model in the case of the Northern Basque Country, we will now examine the situation of each partner and its evolution.

#### **4. Language policy makers : the associations and the Public Bureau for the Basque Language**

##### **4.1. Basque language activists, pressure groups, Basque language protection associations**

It has been a long time since local associations said that Basque was in a dangerous situation. So they had to work in the sixties, in the seventies, opening some areas in the field of language support as private immersive schools or Basque-medium schools named *ikastolak* (the first in France), independent Basque local radio stations, teaching to adults, and so on. On their side, the public authorities did not do anything in favour of the language, and they sometimes stood in the way of the actions of the Basque associations.

Bourhis and Landry say : « Informal support refers to the degree to which a language community has organised itself as a pressure group or organization to represent and safeguard its own language interests in various states and private domains » (2008 : 187). We can say that there has been some results in this way, particularly with the creation of a public institution in charge of the new linguistic policy named *Office public de la langue basque*. But however, associations did not succeed in occupying decision-making roles within this new institution. Nevertheless, some social institutions as immersive schools and Basque language radio stations are governed by their own group. But their development depends on the public financial aids.

They have become operators of the new public policy, carrying on their work but becoming now partners in the linguistic policy.

##### **4.2. The old assimilationist policy and the French legislation**

The strong assimilationist policy of French official unilingualism during two centuries seems to be changing now, particularly under the pressure from international opinion and from the European Union.

France is a multilingual state and there are no provincial language laws as in Spain. Although ratification of the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* was blocked in 1999 by the Constitutional Council as contradicting the Fifth Republic's constitutional provision enshrining French as the language of the Republic (article 2), in July 2008 the government proposed a revision of the French constitution creating a limited official recognition of regional languages as part of the heritage of France.

However, these languages remain without any official status. In the same way, the French republic does not recognize any national minority as the Basque minority could be. In a general way, France defends theoretical respect for regional languages and their individual use, but deny the necessary socioeconomic resources and real public support.

##### **4.3. Language planning in the NBC : a politic under construction**

We can say now that the ideological orientations that French state adopted toward minority languages have changed, partially at least. It's the case of the local authorities in the NBC. The

assimilationist ideology gets weaker and local decision-makers have moved now from *laissez-faire* to an active linguistic policy.

— **Basque language teaching**

The French Ministry of Education organizes the teaching of the regional languages as Basque. In the NBC, schoolchildren are 25,000 in primary and nursery schools.

Among them 30% are learning Basque in immersive or bilingual classes in primary school, 37% in nursery school. This is the highest percentage among the French regional languages. Over the last ten years, Basque learning greatly expanded in primary education, particularly as bilingual teaching, as can be seen in table 2, but very slightly in secondary and higher education. The immersive model is what has less expanded.

Primary education	Year	Number of pupils	Year	Number of pupils
Public school (bilingual teaching)	1993	1,309	2006	3,627
Catholic school (bilingual teaching)	1993	593	2006	1,624
<i>Ikastola</i> (immersive teaching)	1993	1,005	2006	1,462

— **The Public Bureau for the Basque Language (*Office public de la langue basque*)**

In 2004, for the first time, a public interest organisation sponsored by the French state, the Aquitaine Regional Council, the department of Pyrénées Atlantiques, has been created: the *Office public de la langue basque* or Public Bureau for the Basque Language. The Bureau has set up a project of language policy for the promotion and development of the Basque language in the years to come which will determine the action of public entities. It focuses on the basic objective of “complete speakers” and defines children and young people as the top priority.

Financial resources for this new policy are still weak, 2 million euros this year. In comparison, in 2008, the Vice-Ministry for Language Policy of the Basque Autonomous Community had a budget of 13 million euros – educational system not included.

Fortunately, Basque is a cross-border language and there is also a public funding by the Basque Autonomous Community – 500,000 euros. If this aid was not accepted by the French authorities until recently, it is now integrated in the all public funding of the language planning of the Bureau.

In my opinion, the linguistic policy project is too limited, and the final aims not so clear. It lacks date, assessment, except in the domain of school teaching. The Basque minority language seems to have to remain still, I quote Bourhis and Landry, « a □language of solidarity□, restricted to private and informal use and not a □language of status□ used in public and formal societal contexts » (194), except for school teaching.

In the authorities’ mind, the educational system has to compensate for the weak intergenerational family transmission. The language policy project targets children and youth as a priority. But few things are done to ensure the continuity of the language out of school, and in the Basque speaker’s adult life. According to Fishman’s Reversing Language Shift model (1991, 2001), the eight stages are not at all ensured.

To simplify matters, one can say that the strategy adopted seems to be rather of the ‘anything is better than nothing’ type than an effective one.

The revitalization process is based mainly on individual volition and choice.

## 5. Attitude and behaviour toward the Basque language within the society : contradictory results

I have said that the support by French unilingual outgroup and Basque bilingual ingroup citizens who endorse positive attitudes and behaviours towards the Basque minority language is a condition sine qua non of the revitalization of Basque. They can do it by learning, using the language, by putting pressure on the authorities, etc. It is very important to know whether the French unilingual dominant majority in the NBC is sympathetic or not to the existence of the Basque language. In other words, we have to know what the attitude of the society of the NBC is in general in regard to the Basque language.

Bourhis and Landry say: « How speakers perceive the vitality of their own language community may be as important as ‘objective’ assessments of group vitality based on census data and measurable institutional support » (2008 : 191). We will apply this point of view to the Basque language.

Here are some data about this, they are in contradiction.

### — Learning the language

Basque language	Don't want to learn	Tried to learn
Northern Basque Country	61%	8%
Basque Autonomous Community	40%	28%
Navarrese Autonomous Community	56%	15%

According to the *Identité et culture basques au début du XXIème siècle* survey, few adults want to learn Basque. In the Northern Basque Country 61% don't want to learn it, in the Navarrese Autonomous Community they are 56% and 40% in the Basque Autonomous Community. Those who tried to learn are 8% in NBC, 15% in NAC and 28% in BAC (2006 : 62).

Here again the Northern Basque Country seems to be less in favour of the language.

Basque language	Children should learn
Northern Basque Country	56%
Basque Autonomous Community	82%
Navarrese Autonomous Community	43%

On the contrary, in the NBC Basque-language education for children has a large approval, with 56% accepting that all children should learn Basque at school and 23% opposing this (IVth Sociolinguistic Survey of the Basque Country). Most people in the BAC consider that children should be required to learn Basque (82%). But in the Navarrese Autonomous Community they are only 43% of people considering that children should be required to learn Basque.

### — Attitude toward the language

Promotion of Basque language	In favour	Opposed
Northern Basque Country	41.2%	17.6%
Basque Autonomous Community	64.7%	11.2%
Navarrese Autonomous Community	37.7%	34.2%



According to the last Sociolinguistic Survey of the Basque Country, 41.2% of the population of the North support the promotion of Basque language use, whereas 17.6% are against it. In the Basque Autonomous Community two out of three inhabitants (64.7%) view action to promote the use of Basque favourably and 11.2% oppose such an action. In the Navarrese Autonomous Community 37.7% of people view the action to promote the use of Basque favourably. 34.2% oppose such an action.

Here the Navarrese Autonomous Community is more opposed. It has to be said that the Basque-speaking areas of Navarre represent about 10% of the whole.

## **6. The limits of the language policy in the Northern Basque Country : how to reinforce synergy between actors of the linguistic policy, authorities and society ?**

The three protagonists involved in the process of revitalization of the Basque language are in dynamic interactions. Each component contributes to reinforce or to weaken the implemented policy. How can we get the society as the whole to become more conscious and mobilized? The objective is to identify the best way of improving the health and vitality of the Basque language, to determine relevant language planning activities to help Basque language in reaching a sufficient vitality, given that, as Landry and Bourhis say, « the quest for total linguistic and cultural security is an illusion today as it always has been throughout History » (2008 : 206).

« It is important that language use in “solidarity” domains be maintained but also that the group be able to experience and expand its language and culture in “status” domains » say Bourhis and Landry (2008 : 195). At this prospect, the role of the authorities is very important: the creation of the Public Bureau for the Basque Language is a first step. But the Consultative council which was created at the same time – council to which representative associations and some qualified personalities belong – does not have great decision-making power. The Public Bureau for the Basque Language is a governance structure that has to optimize the full collaboration of the three relevant partners. It doesn't do it yet in my opinion.

I quote Bourhis and Landry : « Institutional control is the dimension of vitality *par excellence* needed by language-groups to maintain and assert their presence within state and private institutions (...). It is proposed that language groups need to achieve and maintain a favourable position on the institutional control front if they wish to survive as distinctive collective entities within multilingual states » (2008 : 187).

On the other side, we have seen that Basque language is loosing speed as □language of solidarity□, language restricted to private and informal use. Here the role of the Basque speakers is very important, particularly that of the bilingual parents in increasing use in the home environment, among friends and relations too. The participation of the unilingual French speakers is necessary too, knowing that the current situation is comfortable for them. As parents of pupils who learn Basque at school, as majority who recognize the status and legitimacy of the Basque language, et cetera.

To conclude, the situation and the current politic I have exposed are full of contradictions that are difficult to interpret. However and fortunately, this situation is not static and the ‘point of no return’ has not been reached.

I would like to stress again the basic importance of the synergy between the three partners in collective action in order to reverse Basque language shift (Fishman). From this perspective, the mobilization of the society is now the main challenge in the Northern Basque Country.

## References

- AZURMENDI Maria-Jose, BACHOC Erramun, ZABALETA Francisca, 2000, *Reversing Language Shift: the Case of Basque*, in Fishman Joshua A., *Can Threatened Languages be saved*, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 234-259.
- AZURMENDI Maria-Jose and MARTINEZ DE LUNA Iñaki, 2005, Introduction: presenting the Basque case, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 174, 1-8.
- AZURMENDI Maria-Jose and MARTINEZ DE LUNA Iñaki, 2005, Final reflections. Basque: from the present toward the future, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 174, 85-105.
- BAXOK Erramun [and al.], 2006, *Identité et culture basques au début du XXIème siècle* [Basque Identity and Culture at the Beginning of the XXIst century]. Donostia/San Sebastián, Basque Country, Spain: Eusko Ikaskuntza.
- BASQUE AUTONOMIC GOVERNMENT, 2008, *The continuity of Basque IV – Sociolinguistic Survey of the Basque Country 2006*. [http://www.euskara.euskadi.net/r59-738/en/contenidos/informacion/inkesta\\_soziolinguistikoa2006/en\\_survey/adjuntos/IV\\_incuesta\\_en.pdf](http://www.euskara.euskadi.net/r59-738/en/contenidos/informacion/inkesta_soziolinguistikoa2006/en_survey/adjuntos/IV_incuesta_en.pdf).
- BOURHIS Richard, LANDRY Rodrigue, 2008, Group Vitality, Cultural autonomy and the Wellness of Language Minorities, in Bourhis Richard Y., *The Vitality of the English-Speaking Communitities of Quebec*, Montréal: Universités de Montréal et de Moncton, 185-212.
- COYOS Jean-Baptiste, 2004, *Politique linguistique Langue basque et langue occitane du Béarn et de Gascogne*, San Sebastián, Spain: Elkar.
- FISHMAN Joshua A., 1991, *Reversing Language Shift. Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- , 1991, The case of Basque and Frisian, in Fishman Joshua A., *Reversing Language Shift. Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters, 149-186.
- , 2000, *Can Threatened Languages be saved? Reversing Language Shift, Revisited: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Perspective*, Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- LEGARRA José and M. BACHOC Erramun, 2005, Language policy and planning of the status of Basque, II: Navarre and the Northern Basque Country, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 174, 25–38.
- OFFICE PUBLIC DE LA LANGUE BASQUE, 2006, december, *Projet de politique linguistique « Un objectif central : des locuteurs complets Un coeur de cible : les jeunes générations »*, [www.flarep.com/IKAS-BI/OfficePublicDecembre2006.pdf](http://www.flarep.com/IKAS-BI/OfficePublicDecembre2006.pdf).
- PORCHER Louis, FARO-HANOUN Violette, 2000, *Politiques linguistiques*, Paris: L'Harmattan.
- SOZIOLINGUISTIKA KLUSTERRA, 2007, *Kale erabileraren V. neurketa 2006* [Vth Measurement of Street Use 2006]. *Emaitzak, Azterketak, Gogoetak* [Data, Studies, Observations]. *Bat Soziolinguistika aldizkaria*, 64, Andoain, Basque Country, Spain: Soziolinguistika Klusterra.